

TRAVELING X-RAY INSPECTION SYSTEM WITH COLLIMATORS

Field of the Invention

[0001] The field of the invention relates to X-ray imaging systems and more particularly to cargo inspections systems.

Background of the Invention

[0002] Portable X-ray inspection systems for trucks are generally known. Such systems are typically used to perform non-invasive inspection of trucks for contraband (e.g., explosives, drugs, etc.). Often an X-ray beam is directed through the truck to a set of detectors on an opposing side.

[0003] As the radiation of the X-ray beam passes through the truck, the contents of the truck attenuate the beam based upon the density of the contents. Based upon the attenuation, an image may be formed of the truck's contents. By comparing a truck's manifest with the X-ray image, law-enforcement personnel may make a determination of whether or not they have probable cause to believe that any laws have been broken.

[0004] While conventional X-ray systems are effective in most situations, higher power X-ray systems are needed in some other situations. For example, a tanker full of fuel or a rail car loaded with an industrial chemical would require a relatively high power X-ray beam to penetrate the vehicle to be inspected.

[0005] The use of high power X-rays requires an increased level of shielding. However, shielding is heavy and does not significantly contribute to the overall

effectiveness of the imaging system. On the other hand, without adequate shielding, people working adjacent a vehicle being inspected would suffer radiation exposure, injury and even death. Because of the importance of cargo inspection for contraband, a need exists for a more effective method of protecting personnel from X-rays during the imaging of vehicles.

Summary

[0006] An X-ray apparatus is provided for inspecting a cargo container. The apparatus includes a moveable platform with an X-ray source and X-ray detector disposed on the platform on opposing sides of a scanning zone where the scanning zone may be moved along a length of the cargo container to scan a volume of the cargo container, said X-ray source being disposed in a spaced-apart relationship with respect to the scanning zone. The X-ray apparatus also includes a precollimator disposed on the X-ray platform between the X-ray source and scanning zone, said precollimator being located proximate the scanning zone and an intermediate collimator disposed midway between the X-ray source and the precollimator, said intermediate collimator having a spaced-apart relationship with respect to the precollimator and to the X-ray source.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0007] FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a mobile X-ray inspection system in accordance with an illustrated embodiment of the invention; and

[0008] FIG. 2 to a top plan view of X-ray propagation control that may be used by the system of FIG. 1.

Detailed Description of an Illustrated Embodiment

[0009] FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a moveable vehicle imaging and inspection system 10, shown generally in accordance with an illustrated embodiment of the invention. Included within the system 10 is a moveable platform 14 that supports an X-ray source 16 and detector assembly 18 and that scans containers located within a scanning zone 20. In use, a vehicle (e.g., a truck 12) would be moved into the scanning zone 20 and the platform 14 would be moved along the scanning zone 20 to scan a volume of the truck from one end to the other.

[0010] The platform 14 moves along the scanning zone 20 supported by tracks 22 and a set of wheels 24. A motor and drive system 26 provides the electromotive force to move the platform 14 under control of a controller 28.

[0011] The controller 28 and drive system 26 move the platform 14 at a relatively constant speed along the length of the vehicle 12. As the platform 14 moves, the controller 28 activates the X-ray source 16 and collects data from the detector 18. The data from the detector assembly 18 may be used to form a two-dimensional image of the contents of the vehicle 12.

[0012] The X-ray source 16 may be a relatively high power X-ray source (e.g. a 6 MeV Linatron made by Varian). The detectors 18 may consist of a vertical linear array of 6 MV X-ray detector elements with a pitch (center to center distance) of approximately 1.38mm for receiving the vertical fan beam 44 of X-rays. One or more vertical columns of detectors may be used (either aligned horizontally or offset by one-half the pitch) to improve

resolution. A guard band of X-ray absorbing material may be provided around the detectors to absorb X-rays that impinge on the detector assembly 18 adjacent to the X-ray detectors. The operation of the detectors in conjunction with the processor 28 and display 32 provides a digital radiographic image of the contents of the cargo container 12.

[0013] In order to reduce the shielding requirements of the imaging system 10, a number of collimators may be disposed along the X-ray path 42. In one illustrated embodiment, a source collimator 34 may be disposed in close contact with the X-ray source 16, a precollimator 38 may be disposed on the platform 14 adjacent the scanning path 20, an intermediate collimator 36 may be disposed on the platform 14 midway between the X-ray source 16 and precollimator 38 and a postcollimator 40 may be provided within the detector assembly 18.

[0014] The X-ray source 16 is shown in a spaced-apart relationship with regard to (i.e., located some distance away from) the scanning zone 20 to allow the X-ray beam 42 to expand in a vertical direction to the point where it is able to simultaneously span the full height of the cargo container. As the beam expands in the vertical direction, the beam 42 also expands in the horizontal direction.

[0015] The prior art has, for the most part, ignored the horizontal expansion and instead simply placed a collimator on the source and shielding around the detectors to absorb X-rays that are not absorbed in the detectors. The difficulty with this approach, however, is that it requires significantly more (and heavier) shielding. For example, shielding placed near the source

16 does not have to be as large as the shielding around the detector 18. The reason for this phenomenon is that the beam is much smaller near the source than it is near the detector. Therefore, a collimator near the source does not have to be as big as a collimator near the detector to absorb the same radiation. Further, by collimating the X-ray beam 42 at a number of locations along its path to the detector 18, the shielding around the detector 18 does not have to be as wide or as thick as in prior art devices.

[0016] It has also been found that adjacent, off-axis shielding may be reduced by the use of parallel shielding that form a pair of wings on either side of the collimating slots. Parallel shielding in this regard is shielding that extends parallel to the X-ray path 42 at predefined locations, as discussed below.

[0017] In effect, the collimators 34, 36, 38, 40 functions to thin the fan beam 42. Thinning the fan beam 42 minimizes the volume of cargo within the vehicle 12 that is irradiated during any instant of time thereby reducing in-plane scatter, out-of-plane scatter and dose.

[0018] Turning now to the collimators 34, 36, 38, 40, an explanation will be provided of how X-ray propagation control is accomplished via use of the collimators. In this regard, FIG. 2 is a top plan view of the X-ray path 42 of FIG. 1. It should be noted that for purposes of explanation, the scale perpendicular to the X-ray path has been expanded by a ratio to 200 to 1. It should also be noted that the word "source" in FIG. 2 refers to the origin of the X-ray beam 42 within the enclosure 16 and not specifically to the enclosure 16 shown in FIG. 1.

[0019] The source collimator 34 may be conventional with an appropriate thickness (e.g., 450 mm). An aperture (i.e., a slot) of the source collimator 34 may be structured to create a fan-beam shaped X-ray envelope that diverges at an appropriate fan angle (e.g., 26.5 degrees) in a vertical direction. The vertical size of the slot of the collimator 42 may be chosen in this respect to allow the X-ray beam 44 to span an appropriate interrogation height (e.g., 11 feet) of a cargo container 12.

[0020] As shown in FIG. 2, the source collimator 34 may be located 250 mm from the source of the X-ray beam 42. The beam 42 at the source may have a horizontal width at this point of 2mm.

[0021] A width (i.e., in the horizontal direction) at an entrance to the collimating slot of the source collimator 34 may be 3 mm. The width of the exit of the slot in the source collimator 34 may be 5.5 mm.

[0022] As shown in FIGs. 1 and 2, the intermediate collimator 36 may have a spaced apart relationship with the source collimator 34 and the precollimator 38. In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 2, the intermediate collimator is 700 mm from the source collimator and 2600 mm from the precollimator 38. Also, as shown in FIG. 2, the intermediate collimator 36 may have a collimating slot with an entrance width of 5.5 mm and an exit width of 6.5 mm.

[0023] As the main beam M_S passes through the source collimator 34, it begins to expand in the horizontal direction. In addition, the main beam M_S has a penumbra M_P . As shown in FIG. 2, the main beam M_S is approximately 2 mm wider than the entrance slot of the intermediate collimator 36. The penumbra beam M_P is about 6 mm wider

than the entrance slot. Since the entrance slot of the intermediate collimator 34 is narrower than the main beam M_S and penumbra beam M_P , the beam 42 is collimated within the intermediate collimator 34 with any X-ray energy outside the slot being absorbed by the body of the collimator 36.

[0024] Similarly, the precollimator 38 may have a collimating slot with an entrance width of 6.5 mm and an exit width of 7 mm. The main beam M_i from the intermediate collimator 35 is shown as having a width of 12.5 mm and the penumbra P_i with a width of 18 mm.

[0025] From the precollimator 38, the X-ray beam 42 propagates through the container 12 to the detector 18. As the beam 42 passes the midpoint of the container 12, the beam 42 may have a full width at half maximum (FWHM) of 7.75 mm.

[0026] The collimator slot of the postcollimator 40 within the detector assembly 18 may be provided in the form of a recess filled with scintillating elements 44 backed by photodiodes 46. The collimating slot (i.e., the recess) in the postcollimator 40 may have a width of 5 mm. The solid area behind the photodetectors 46 (and the remainder of the body of the postcollimator 40) may form a beamstop that absorbs the remainder of the beam 42. As above, it may be noted that the main beam M_P has a width of 11 mm and the penumbra P_P a width of 18 mm.

[0027] The post collimator 40 functions to rejection out-of-plane scatter. The post collimator 40 also functions to define the edges of the beam more precisely than most distant collimators. This not only helps equalize signals detected by the detectors, but also

protects the photodetectors by restricting the beam 42 to the portion of the scintillating elements 44 that is opposite the photodetectors.

[0028] As also shown in FIG. 2, the intermediate collimator 36, precollimator 38 and postcollimator 40 are each provided with parallel shielding in the form of a pair of wings 48, 50, 52 centered on opposing sides of the collimating slots that each extend towards the source 16. The wings 48 of the intermediate collimator 36 are shown to be 7 mm from a centerline of the collimating slot and extend 50 mm towards the source 16 (parallel to the beam 42). Similarly, the wings 50 of the precollimator 38 are shown to be 12 mm from a centerline of the collimating slot and extend 50 mm towards the source 16 (parallel to the beam 42) and the wings 52 of the postcollimator 40 are shown to be 10 mm from a centerline of the collimating slot and extend 50 mm towards the source 16 (parallel to the beam 42).

[0029] Because the pairs of wings 48, 50, 52 are long (50 mm) and relatively close together (i.e., less than 12 mm apart), the wings 48, 50, 52 have been found to be effective in intercepting and extinguishing most of the backscatter from their respective collimators. The backscatter that escapes the wings 48, 50, 52 is directed towards the source 16 with an angle of no more than 13 degrees from the axis of beam travel.

[0030] It may be noted from FIG. 2 that the impinging main beam M_s , M_i , M_p , of a previous collimator is, in all cases, wider than a subsequent collimator. For example, the main beam M_s from the source collimator 34 is 3 mm wider than the collimating slot of the intermediate

collimator 36, the main beam M_i from the intermediate collimator 36 is 3 mm wider than the collimating slot of the precollimator 38 and the main beam M_p from the precollimator 38 is 3 mm wider than the collimating slot of the postcollimator 40. The extra width of the main beam into each collimator may be provided to accommodate misalignment of the collimators 34, 36, 38, 40 with respect to the path 42 of the beam caused by thermal expansion or assembly misalignments. The same 3 mm may also be provided between the edges of the penumbra and the wings 48, 50, 52 for the same reason.

[0031] In general, the use of multiple collimators 34, 36, 38, 40 allows the size of the individual collimators 34, 36, 38, 40 to be smaller and lighter. Since the intermediate collimator 36 is closer to the source 16 than the precollimator 38, the intermediate collimator may be proportionately shorter in height than the precollimator 38 and postcollimator 40. Further, the horizontal collimation of the successive collimators allows the width of each collimator 36, 38, 40 to be significantly reduced.

[0032] For example, the source collimator 34 because of its association with the X-ray source 16 may have an overall width of about 12 inches (i.e., six inches (152 mm) on either side of the centerline of the beam 42). The intermediate collimator 36 and precollimator 38 may have an overall width of about 6 inches (i.e., 3 inches (76.2 mm) on either side of the centerline of the beam 42).

[0033] Similarly, the postcollimator 40 may be relatively narrow and use a tapering arrangement. For example, the wings 52 of the postcollimator 40 may have a

thickness of 500 mm for a distance that extends up to 10 inches (254 mm) on either side of the centerline of the beam 42. After 10 inches, the thickness of the beamstop portion of the postcollimator 40 may be proportionately reduced based upon the geometry of impinging X-rays. For example, if X-ray energy were to enter at a 45 degree angle, then the thickness of the beamstop need be no more than 70% of the thickness of the central portion of the beamstop.

[0034] It should be noted that the dimensions shown in FIG. 2 are exemplary only. Other X-ray systems may be provided with the same functionality of the system described above by using the same proportionality factors set forth in the description and drawings. For example, the distance separating the wings 48, 50 of the intermediate collimator 36 and precollimator 38 may be approximately one-percent of the distance to the X-ray source 16. Similarly, a proportionality factor may be established that relates the widths of the collimating slots of the source collimator 34, the intermediate collimator 36, the precollimator 38 and the postcollimator 52.

[0035] In addition, the use of multiple collimators allows the overall width of the individual collimators to be proportionately reduced. For example, the intermediate collimator 36 need only have a horizontal width (perpendicular to beam travel) of about 6% or less of the distance to the X-ray source. Similarly, the precollimator need only have a horizontal width of about 2% or less of the distance to the X-ray source.

[0036] A specific embodiment of a mobile apparatus for inspecting cargo according to the present invention has

been described for the purpose of illustrating the manner in which the invention is made and used. It should be understood that the implementation of other variations and modifications of the invention and its various aspects will be apparent to one skilled in the art, and that the invention is not limited by the specific embodiments described. Therefore, it is contemplated to cover the present invention, any and all modifications, variations, or equivalents that fall within the true spirit and scope of the basic underlying principles disclosed and claimed herein.